

PAIRED TEXTS  
texts that share a  
theme or topic

# STUTTERING DOESN'T HOLD ME BACK

How one girl copes  
with a speech  
disorder—and  
steals the show

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

REPORTED BY  
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Bella Negron, 13

Informational Text



AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:

What are the challenges of having  
a stutter?

Supporting a pink floral shirt and blue jeans, 13-year-old Bella Negron struts onto the stage, side by side with her friend Daniel. She flashes a grin at the sold-out crowd of 180 people. A band starts to play, and Bella taps her foot to the music.

She's nervous, but you would never know it.

Together, Bella and Daniel belt out a pop ballad they wrote called "Now It's Our Time," hitting every note with ease.

When the song ends, Bella knows—and the audience knows—that she and Daniel totally rocked it.

Not long ago, if you had asked Bella to perform onstage, she would have looked at you as if you'd asked her to sprout wings and fly. In fact, talking to just one person was a big challenge for Bella. That's because she has a speech **disorder** called a stutter.

A stutter makes it difficult to speak. People who stutter often repeat or stretch out sounds and syllables, or they become silent in the middle of a word or sentence. The disorder occurs most often among kids ages 2 to 5, and although most outgrow it, some children continue to stutter when they're older. Today, about 3 million Americans have a stutter.

## A Puzzling Problem

The causes of stuttering are not well understood, though many experts think stuttering is **inherited**. The source of the problem may lie in the left frontal **lobe** of the brain, which controls language.

Most people who stutter are a lot like you. Visit Bella in Wheatley Heights, New York, and you'll find her singing Ariana Grande songs in her bedroom, shopping at Forever 21 with her older sister, or playing *Minecraft* with her big brother. The problem is that when Bella opens her mouth to talk, sometimes the words don't come out the way she wants them to. She repeats the first syllable of a word over and over before she can finish saying the word.







Bella and SAY founder Taro Alexander

Bella has been facing this challenge since she was 3 years old. In school, she rarely spoke in class for fear she would be humiliated. And year after year, she has had to deal with bullies. “In seventh grade in the cafeteria, this girl was like, ‘You can’t even talk right,’ and ‘You don’t have any friends.’ Then she pulled my hair,” Bella remembers. Bella’s feelings were so hurt that she ran to the school bathroom to cry.

## A Big Change

It’s tough for Bella to make friends, because some kids find it easier to avoid her than to talk to her. Sometimes people grow impatient when she speaks, telling her to hurry up or finishing her sentences for her. (Bella’s advice: The best thing a listener can do is wait patiently for a person who stutters to finish. “Don’t stare at them, rush them, or tell them to breathe,” she says.) One boy at school mocks her when she stutters by quoting a line from the Adam Sandler movie *Billy Madison*: “T-t-today, Junior.”

“Some people think that I’m faking it to get attention. Others think that I’m shy. And some people think I’m stupid,” Bella says. “But stuttering has nothing to do with your personality or how smart you are.”

Four years ago, Bella’s life finally started to change when she joined SAY: the Stuttering Association for the Young. The group teaches kids who stutter how to sing, dance, act, and recite speeches. Bella was amazed by how friendly and accepting the other kids in the program were—it was something she had never experienced.

## FAMOUS STUTTERERS

Stuttering didn’t limit the success of:



Tiger Woods



Emily Blunt



King George VI



Vice President Joe Biden

The founder and president of SAY, Taro Alexander, relates to what Bella has gone through, because he started stuttering at age 5. “I spent a lot of my life feeling like that kid on the **sidelines**—not having the courage to jump in because of fear of being made fun of or teased,” says Alexander.

When he was 19, Alexander became a professional actor, performing on TV shows and in musical theater productions. His confidence started to grow.

In 2001, Alexander founded SAY. “I wanted to show kids that stuttering doesn’t have to hold them back from anything,” he says.

Because performing helped him so much, he thought it could help others too.

And he was right.

## No Longer Alone

Bella goes to SAY for about two hours each week. Every spring, she and the other kids in the program perform in front of hundreds of parents and supporters. And in the summers, Bella travels to North Carolina to attend the SAY sleepaway camp, which welcomes kids from all over the country.

Being part of SAY hasn’t solved Bella’s stuttering problem. But it has helped her feel less self-conscious. Plus, she’s made friends. Before joining SAY, she didn’t know anyone else who stuttered. Now she has met more than 170 people who stutter, which makes her feel less alone.

The program has helped Bella at school too. She is no longer afraid to speak up in class. Her grades have risen, and she has a lot more confidence. She even landed a spot in her school play.

“I used to watch movies about people who took chances and got what they wanted. I used to think, ‘When will I stumble upon my chance?’” Bella says. “Then I realized: It’s the other way around. *You’ve got to go after it.*” ●

## ARTICLE

# The Incredible Power of Speech

Humans are amazing creatures. But in terms of awesome powers, nothing beats our ability to speak. **BY LAUREN TARSHIS**



Watch out. A gorilla sticking out its tongue might be saying “I’m mad!”

**W**hat could be easier than talking? We chat with our friends, whisper our secrets, yell at our little brothers, and cheer for our favorite teams. Over the course of a lifetime, the average person utters approximately 370 million words.

But as simple as it may seem, using words to express thoughts and feelings is, in fact, incredibly complicated.

## A Mysterious Process

All living creatures can communicate in some way: Cobras fan out their hoods to warn their enemies, fireflies set their tails aglow to attract mates, sea lion mothers **bellow** to call their babies,

and elephants **entwine** their trunks to express love. From mighty mammals to itty-bitsy insects, being able to communicate is key to survival.

But communicating is different from speaking. Only humans have the ability to speak. And uttering even just three little words—“Hey, what’s up?”—is part of an amazing and somewhat **baffling** process.

When you talk, many parts of your body have to work together. First, your lungs exhale air across your larynx, or voice box, which is in your throat. Inside your larynx are your vocal cords, two rubbery folds that vibrate in the rush of air. These cords produce the sound of your voice.

That is just the beginning,

though. To make words, the vibrating air needs to be broken up into different sounds. A team effort by your tongue, lips, jaw, and teeth makes this happen. This entire amazing production is controlled by your brain.

Speech is so complex that even scientists struggle to understand how it works. So it’s not surprising that finding cures for speech disorders, such as stuttering, has been difficult. In recent years, however, scientists have made breakthroughs. In 2012, scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, pinpointed the parts of the brain that control some portions of the speech process.

Soon, the power of speech may no longer be such a mystery. ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Write an article for your school newspaper or website to help your classmates understand stuttering as well as how they can be helpful to someone who stutters. Use information from both texts. Send your article to **SPEECH CONTEST**. Five winners will each get a copy of *Paperboy* by Vince Vawter. See page 2 for details.

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